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2020-06-01

Varfolomeeva , A 2020 , ' Lines in the Sacred Landscape : The Entanglement of Roads,
Resources, and Informal Practices in Buriatiia ' , Sibirica: Interdisciplinary Journal of Siberian
Studies , vol. 19 , no. 2 , pp. 27-49 . <https://doi.org/10.3167/sib.2020.190203>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/323597>

<https://doi.org/10.3167/sib.2020.190203>

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Lines in the Sacred Landscape

The Entanglement of Roads, Resources, and Informal Practices in Buriatiia

ANNA VARFOLOMEEVA

Abstract: This article discusses how transportation routes affect local relations with place and resources while being simultaneously shaped by the landscape. It focuses on Okinskii district (Oka) of Buriatiia in southcentral Siberia. The Mondy-Orlik road, which connected the district with the rest of Buriatiia, offered extended opportunities for the development of extractive businesses and tourism in the district. For many residents, the greater accessibility of Oka connotes a threat to local traditions and beliefs. The article examines the interconnectedness of economic, social, and cultural changes that the Mondy-Orlik road brought to Oka. The article demonstrates how the new road became entangled with the lines that previously existed in the landscape, the connections between human and non-human actors, and the patterns of informal jade extraction.

Keywords: Buriatiia, entanglement, informal mining, infrastructure, jade, resource extraction, road

Any research conducted in Okinskii district (Russ.: *raion*) of Buriatiia, southcentral Siberia, starts with the road. It takes around twelve hours to get to Oka—as the district is often referred to by the locals—from Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buriatiia; thus, transportation becomes the first puzzle to solve in one's fieldwork. Aspiring researchers face multiple logistics-related questions. Should they travel to Oka from Irkutsk or Ulan-Ude? Is it better to take the daily minibuses (Russ.: *marshrutka*) or use car sharing? With whom should they coordinate the details? The trip takes an entire day as Oka gradually unfolds in front of the traveler as the car moves in between the mountains, following the twisting path of the Mondy-Orlik road.

The construction of the Mondy-Orlik road, which connects the district to the rest of the republic, was completed in 1993 (see Figure 1).



Until that time, it was possible to access the area only by plane or, in winter months, via a temporary snow or ice road (Russ.: *zimmnik*). The road significantly changed the life of Oka residents and influenced the development of resource extraction, tourism, and communications in the area. Because the road follows the path of the Oka River, it occasionally floods, interrupting transportation in the region for several days. Oka residents find ways to adjust to transportation disruptions: from changing plans and routes, to informal people's mobilization through social media to repair parts of the road. This article focuses on the role of increased mobility and transportation in changing people's relations with the place and subsurface resources in Okinskii district. The article is primarily based on participant observation and interviews conducted in Orlik and Sorok villages (in 2016) and in Ulan-Ude (in 2016 and 2017).¹ In addition, it relies on the analysis of local newspapers as well as social network publications.² Using Tim Ingold's (2007a, 2015) concept of the entanglement of lines as the theoretical background, the article demonstrates how the line of the Mondy-Orlik road became intertwined with other lines of the landscape: the Oka River, patterns of human movement, and informal routes of jade transportation. The road changed human-landscape relations in Oka, as its construction expanded the state's influence in the area. Further, the road played a role in the formation of new lines and connections, such as informal communication and information sharing, in case of transportation disruptions.

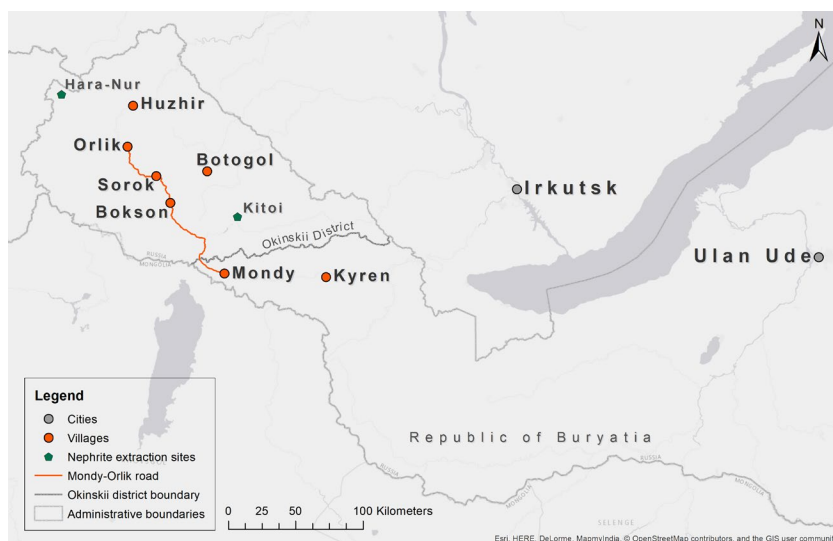


Figure 1. The Mondy-Orlik road on the map of Oka. Map by Anastasia Kvasha.

As Tatiana Argounova-Low (2012) demonstrates, roads have a special significance in many ethnographic narratives, not only because they represent an intrinsic part of the researcher's immersion into the field, but also because they appear in local stories and legends. During my fieldwork in Oka, the Mondy-Orlik road was a vital part of my interviewees' narratives. Its construction symbolically divided the district's past into "before the road" and "after the road." This article shows how the newly built infrastructures become a part of sacred relations between the residents and their land, questioning the divide between physical and built environment. When dwelling in the environment is viewed as the result of worlds being "made before they are lived in" (Ingold 2000: 179), nature and infrastructure become intrinsically coherent. The article demonstrates, using the example of Oka, how the rhythms of nature, transportation, resource extraction, and human mobility function in parallel, creating the meshwork of codependence.

Roads within Networks and Entanglements

This research was inspired by Tim Ingold's works (2007a, 2015) devoted to lines and entanglements. Whereas lines may be seen as the simplest forms of connections, this article views a line as "a much more complex and colorful figure than is usually thought" (Rosenberg and Grafton 2012: 10). Lines intertwine in the landscape; they change, appear, and disappear as time passes (forming timelines), and they also entangle with each other or with objects related to them. Visible and tangible lines such as roads or paths intertwine with the invisible lines of interpersonal relations, human-nonhuman bonds or, as Ian Hodder (2012) notes, the connections between things which do not necessarily include humans. Lines of movement of different groups may also weave around and cross each other (Watson 2010). The patterns of resource extraction sites may interact directly with the landscape, shaping and changing it (Ey and Sherval 2015). When discussing such intertwined irregular connections without a particular directionality, Ingold (2010: 3) defines them as entanglements, or as "a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement." For Ingold (2010), meshworks represent non-regulated connections that are centered on flows and fluxes—unlike organized, planned, and directed networks, which are comprised of connection. This article focuses on the entanglement of landscape features, human biographies, and the built infrastructure viewing them as intersecting lines.

Paths and roads represent the manifestations of human movement through the landscape. Trails, paths, and roads connect disparate elements of the humans' daily lives (Darling, Erickson, and Snead 2009); they also symbolize the state's initiatives on changing the landscape (Mitchell 2002; Scott 1999). The construction of the new road in a remote area means the latter's more extensive integration into the state. Still, because of the poor maintenance of the road or inaccessibility of certain parts of the region, the condition of remoteness may be present (Kuklina and Holland 2018). The newly built road represents a new line entering the landscape, wherein it immediately starts intertwining with formerly existing lines, and with people's movements, mobility patterns, and connections. It evolves dominant temporal imaginaries related to future connectivity and its benefits or threats, but at the same time to political and material histories of the place (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2015; Harvey and Knox 2015).

As Nikolai Vakhtin (2017) notes in his introduction to a special issue of *Sibirica* on infrastructure and mobility, the multilayered concept of infrastructure becomes one of the fundamental concepts of the contemporary anthropology of the North. The Russian North and Siberia are often associated with remoteness and lack of connectivity, even though the situation may be more complex than that, and various aspects of infrastructure may be perceived differently by members of the same community (Vakhtin 2017). Similar to this article, many academic works on Siberia include a description of infrastructural challenges. For example, Caroline Humphrey describes her trip to Tuva in the late 1980s: "There is no railway, the road crosses a high mountain pass which is snowy even in midsummer, and plane tickets, unless booked months in advance, are obtainable only on a who-you-know basis" (1989: 6). The representation of Siberia as the region of large distances and remoteness is also widespread in popular culture. The protagonist of the Soviet-time "Song of Enamored Yakut"³ states, "I need just one day to reach my beloved one, just a little bit—two hundred kilometers."⁴ This ironic contrast between the words "just a little bit" and the actual journey by reindeer creates a vivid image of vast and remote Yakutia.

Ethnographic studies on roads and mobility in Siberia show the importance of roads and new transportation possibilities in remote areas as well as the entanglements of social aspects of the road with the lives of locals (Argounova-Low 2012; Argounova-Low and Prisyazhnyi 2015; Kuklina and Holland 2018; Safonova and Sántha 2011). The road's biography intertwines with the biographies of people living next to it, while also reflecting their relations with the state (Argounova-Low

and Prisyazhnyi 2015). Ingold (2007a) distinguishes between two types of relations with the landscape and formation of lines—transport and wayfaring. Whereas the wayfarer, when moving, actively engages with the land and treats it “as a mesh of interweaving lines” (Ingold 2007a: 75), transportation routes are oriented toward a particular destination. Transportation lines are, in most cases, straight and regular; they are planned, surveyed, and controlled by the state (Ingold 2007a). Similarly, James Scott (1999) contrasts the example of Bruges as a medieval city formed by lines of dwelling with straight lines of the “grid city” Chicago, which were planned as a whole ensemble and did not follow any of the preexisting lines such as the river.

This article perceives the Mondy-Orlik road as encompassing both “transport” and “wayfaring” modalities. The road serves the purposes of the state, such as easier access to resource extraction and improved transportation to and from Oka. It is seen as a sign of progress and a symbol of increased control. However, as its line was integrated into the landscape by following the river’s route, it became largely included in local wayfaring practices. On the way toward Orlik, for example, travelers will often stop to bring offerings to the spirits of territory. The problems with the road are often related to nature; for example, parts of the road may be washed out by heavy rains or floods. The road generates multiple meanings as a network designed by the state and as a part of complex entanglements between people, resources, and the land.

Resources and Transportation in Oka: Overcoming Remoteness

Okinskii district derives its name from the Oka River, a confluent of the Angara River. There is another smaller river in the area, the Irkut, which passes through Oka and its neighboring Tunkinskii district. The Oka River passes through most of the district’s settlements, including Bokson, Sorok, Orlik, Saiany, and Huzhir. Oka is a remote part of Buriatiia and a scarcely populated region with 5,400 people within its territory of 26,000 square kilometers. The majority of the population consists of Oka Buriats and Soiots, whose cultures developed in the mutual influence of each other throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Pavlinkskaya 1999). It is difficult to draw a dividing line between Oka Buriats and Soiots, as the notions of ethnic identity are in constant flux in Oka. Even though approximately one-half of the district’s residents are registered as Soiots, many of them claimed during

interviews that they are “in fact, Buriats.” David Anderson’s (2000, 91) notion of “relational identity,” which refers to moving between several identities within one’s life span, applies to the patterning of Oka’s ethnic identities. Here, I use the notion of “Oka residents” to encompass Oka Buriats and Soiets without dividing them into separate categories.

The history of Buriats and Soiets in Okinskii district was marked by an establishment of a symbolic dividing line—the border between Russia and China—after the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727. After the border was established, the ancestors of Soiets were cut off from their kin ethnic groups, Dukhas (Tsaatans) and Tozhus. Furthermore, the establishment of the border influenced the migration of Buriat families to Oka from Mongolia as Buriats were encouraged by the government to settle in Okinskii and Tunkinskii districts to populate the border area (Pavlinskaya 2002). By the mid-eighteenth century, the ethnic composition of the area changed following the influx of Buriats.

For a long time, Oka had been viewed as a mysterious faraway place that is extremely difficult to reach. As a 2015 article in the *Akha* newspaper devoted to local legends states: “Surrounded . . . by high unassailable mountains, the valley was for a long time connected to the neighboring lands only by a dangerous forest path . . . In our time, people concerned with the search for treasures hidden deep in the bowels of the earth managed to break through the road to the closed valley . . . But even now, the spirits of the ancient past could be seen in those places” (*Akha*, July 17, 2015, 7). The reference to “the search for treasures” directly connects the issues of resource extraction and remoteness. Oka has rich deposits of mineral resources, including graphite, gold, and jade. In different periods of Oka’s history, the issues of resource extraction and transportation were often raised simultaneously, starting in the mid-nineteenth century when Buriat and Soiot hunters accidentally found high-quality graphite near Mount Botogol (Dorzhieva 2014). During that period, graphite was widely used for pencils but remained scarce in Europe (Hobta and Snopkov 2007). Soon after the discovery of graphite in Oka, its extraction was initiated by Jean-Pierre Alibert, an entrepreneur of French origin living in Russia. Many locals worked at the graphite mine, and soon a miners’ settlement appeared near Botogol. The extracted graphite was transferred to Germany, to the Faber Company in Nuremberg. Transportation of graphite from Oka to Europe was a challenge. Alibert used two roads leading toward the Botogol pit: the winter road functioning between November and March and the all-season horse road. A part of the extracted graphite was even transported by water down the Shilka and Amur

ivers. Then it was sent by ships through the Pacific, the Indian, and the Atlantic oceans, all the way around Africa (Hobta and Snopkov 2007). All modes and routes of transportation were undoubtedly expensive. In 1857, the extraction of graphite in Botogol stopped as a new technology for making pencil leads out of lower quality graphite was discovered in France. Soon after that, Alibert left the region, and the graphite pit was slowly abandoned.

In the Soviet period, Oka became the site of active geological explorations, with geological brigades searching for gold, jade, wolframite, molybdenum, and other natural resources. For many residents of the district, who lived as a closed community, mining explorations in the region meant their first direct encounters with Russians (AFD B14, AFD B15). In this period, references to the region's remoteness and transportation problems in newspaper publications devoted to Oka geologists were frequent. The ability to travel vast distances in poor conditions was viewed as a sign of the perseverance and determination of Oka's explorers, following the general Soviet-era narratives of romanticized exploration (Bolotova 2004). The Soviet geologists' trips and related challenges are described vividly in the publications devoted to the discovery of Bokson deposit (*Saianskaia nov'* [SN], October 31, 1987): "The horse trail crossed the upper Oka to Irkut through the Nukhan-Daban Pass. Under heavy loads, the horses would fall . . . People would gather the packages with frozen hands, bring the horses back, and move on. Whereas now this route from Bokson to Mondy can be passed in four-five hours, in those days, they walked for four days." The discoveries of new natural resources in Oka were directly connected to building new roads and, as a result, to the development of the area. In the same article of *Saianskaia nov'*, the local guide of young female geologists finds out that they have discovered a new bauxite deposit. He tells them happily, "Girls, how great it is . . . This means roads, electricity . . . This is the heyday of our land."

Before the Mondy-Orlik road was constructed, the area was connected to the rest of Buriatia by plane or by the old Oka path, which was usually traveled by horses. It was especially difficult to travel across the treeless plain in foggy, rainy, or snowy weather. A local legend states that only a good-hearted moral traveler would be able to cross the plain to get to Oka, while ill-intentioned people would be stopped by the forces of nature. In winter months, it was possible to travel to Oka by car using zimnik (*Akha*, October 14, 2016; AFD B24). However, while the zimnik was initially planned to be operational for three months a year, it was not always the case. Transportation could easily be disrupted due

to dry segments of the road (Russ.: *sushniaki*) where the water ran low while the ice stayed. It was possible that the zimnik planned for three months would function for only half of the time (AFD B24).

Travel by plane was also unreliable. There were two airports in Oka: one, situated right in Orlik, was built for smaller planes (flying from Kyren) while the larger one, built across the river from Orlik, could accept planes from Ulan-Ude. It could happen that because of bad weather in Oka, air transportation would be disrupted for several days. The residents of Oka were used to staying at the airport of Kyren for hours waiting for the plane and playing chess or talking (AFD B10). By the late 1980s, the passengers from Kyren had the option to be picked up and transported to Oka by off-roaders in the event of prolonged nonflying weather (SN, November 13, 1991, 2). The former runway of the Orlik airport is still present in the settlement, now as an empty field close to its center. The locals readily talk about the time “before the road” when they frequently saw planes there.

The construction of the gravel road to Orlik began in 1985–1986 and, approximately at the same time, the fast development of gold extraction began. The construction of the Mondy-Orlik road was carried out by Buriatavtodor in cooperation with the gold mining enterprise Zabaikalzoloto (AFD B24). Initially, they could not agree on the route of the future road; Zabaikalzoloto representatives wanted to build the road connecting gold deposits in Buriatiia more directly, not through Mondy. However, after several discussions, it was decided to build the road from Mondy. My interviewee concluded the story saying, “If we did not agree, there would be no road to Oka!” (AFD B24). He thus directly connected the final construction of the road with the outcome of the discussions with mining representatives.

Because of financial constraints, the Mondy-Orlik road was not fully finished in the 1990s. As my informant, a former manager at Buriatavtodor, recalls:

Well, it [the road] was not finished, because you know, the roaring nineties,⁵ there was not enough money for anything, there was a tough situation in the whole country. But we allocated the money little by little, we managed to force the construction, but the problem is that almost no fortification works have been carried out. And because of this, the road gets washed out from time to time . . . But! Whatever it [the road] is, it exists today after all.” (AFD B24)

The process of road construction was often covered in local media. In one of the publications, the new road was called “The road of life.”

In the article, one Oka resident proudly states, “We could not even imagine that such a wonderful route would be built in these steep and impregnable mountains” (SN, November 13, 1991, 2).

An article by the former head of Okinskii district, Valerii Mongolov, published in *Saianskaia nov’* soon after the road was finished, expressed concerns related to the road. As Mongolov states, “With the construction of the road in Oka many problems in its residents’ life have eased, but new ones have appeared. The construction means the interference from outside into nature” (SN, September 24, 1993). Mongolov also notes that the road made it possible to start the development of the Zun-Kholbinskii gold deposit. The deposit would mean new investments for the district’s budget. At the same time, extensive mining development could harm the established local way of life and sacred relations with nature (SN, September 24, 1993). Several other publications in *Saianskaia Nov’* and *Akha* echo this sentiment. The article published in *Akha* in 1994 states, “So far, the Saian mountains have rescued the Okinskii district from the onslaught of industrial development” (*Akha*, July 15, 1994). As these quotes demonstrate, the construction of the paved road was seen as a symbol of lessened protection against the unwanted influences of the industry.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2016-2017, the leading company extracting gold in Oka was Buriatzoloto, which operated out of Samarta, a settlement situated approximately 100 kilometers from Sorok. Some of my informants noted that company is involved in many social initiatives in the district financing youth projects (AFD B6). However, the locals also complained during the interviews that Buriatzoloto was not investing enough in the district’s infrastructure and general well-being while it was making billions of rubles on “their gold” (AFD B22). Another concern is that locals are rarely employed by gold mining companies in the region, which prefer to recruit fly-in-fly-out workers. As a result, many Oka residents feel that their land is exploited by outsiders while they are not able to take advantage of their natural resources.

The Mondy-Orlik road was viewed simultaneously as a sign of progress and a symbol of outside influences. Better communication and transportation meant more extensive mining development, and industrial exploration could impact not only the nature but also the independence that locals were used to. One of the attempts to gain this independence is the recent project of recognizing the whole territory of Oka as a territory of traditional subsistence with limited resource extraction. The project was initiated in 2016 but is still under discussion.

“Synchronization” with Landscape through Changing Mobility Patterns

The years of living in remoteness influenced the special bonds Oka residents have with their land. Many of my informants felt a patriotic connection toward their places of residence. They talked passionately about Oka’s beautiful nature or glorious past. Although young residents of Oka leave to study in Ulan-Ude, Irkutsk, or even Saint Petersburg, many of them return home. Nordan, one of my informants, stated, “Homeland was calling for me” (AFD B23) when referring to her return to Oka after finishing college studies in Ulan-Ude. Nordan explained that she felt connected to Oka as the place of her childhood, even when she lived outside of the district. Another informant, Balta, stated that although he was struggling financially at the time of the interview, he still valued living in Oka because of local hospitality and a strong sense of community. As he noted, “There are a lot of connections here, we all know each other . . . and we are rich here with the gold, the jade, and all the prey in the forests. You cannot starve here. You can enter every house and be treated like a guest; this is our way of living” (AFD B5). Balta studied in Ulan-Ude but decided to return to Oka despite facing unemployment here as he felt more at home in Orlik. He earned money through helping others with repair work or other household activities, hunting and, occasionally, informal mining.

The high dependence on nature in Okinskii district created a unique connection between locals and the land, which merges Buddhism and shamanism. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, shamanism means crossing ontological borders “to adopt the perspectives of non-human subjectivities” (2004, 468). In line with this definition, the mix of Buddhism and shamanism in Oka creates specific types of knowledge based on irregular and multidirectional interactions among human and nonhuman actors in the landscape. In Oka Buriat and Soiot shamanist beliefs, various parts of the landscape, including its resources, are governed by spirits (Gulgenova 2010; Pavlinskaya 1999). Therefore, when extracting resources from the earth, one is at the same time negotiating with the spirit masters that may either allow or prohibit the extraction.

The residents of Oka are often characterized as people living in harmony with natural cycles (Shodorova and Iur’eva 2010). Daily routines in Oka, such as yak herding, preparing wood for winter, haymaking, hunting, or selling cattle meat, are planned following the changes in nature (AFD B27). In the interview with the former Head of Okinskii district, Bair Baldanov, this practice of attuning daily and yearly rhythms with

natural cycles was called “synchronization” (Russ.: *sinkhronizatsiia*).⁶ In this article, I use this concept to analyze specific strategies used by Oka residents in their interactions with the landscape. In Oka, synchronization with the rhythms of nature is crucial as the natural conditions are often harsh. As natural changes do not follow any pre-defined rhythm, synchronization practices require being prepared for swift readjustments of one’s plans or mobility patterns. The relations between humans and the sacred landscape of Oka could be viewed as meshworks of flows and unstructured connections in-between beings who mutually constitute each other through their shared activities. These relations could also be framed as “a nexus of intentionalities” (Gell 1996, 29) or “architecture of relationships” (Anderson et al. 2017, 398). In this sense, “synchronization” of Oka dwellers becomes a way to attune to intertwined intentionalities of other sentient beings in the landscape. Humans, animals, and spirits of place in Oka enter into dynamic relationships where mobility patterns of all landscape dwellers may change depending on constant negotiations between humans and nonhuman sentient others.

Several cases from my fieldwork illustrate the flexibility of Oka dwellers regarding the natural rhythms and cycles. During my trip from Orlik to Huzhir (a settlement in the northern part of Oka) with a group of locals, our car had to pass a narrow section of the road next to a mountain. In general, the unpaved road from Orlik to Huzhir is in worse condition than the Mondy-Orlik road, and the car was moving rather slowly because of that, but the section ahead of us seemed especially unsafe. The driver announced, “This is quite a dangerous part, the stones may fall onto the road at any moment.” The car stopped, and the passengers joined the ritual of treating the masters of the territory with rice and drops of vodka. In such situations, leaving treats is seen as negotiating with the territory masters, and with nature in general. As it is not possible to predict when a rockfall might occur, the synchronization process is about searching for cooperation with the forces of nature.

Another example of synchronization with nature concerns a flood I witnessed while staying in Oka in July 2016. After the heavy rain, the level of water in the river rose, and several parts of the Mondy-Orlik road were washed out. Transportation across the river by boat was also not possible, making several villages situated on the other side of the river inaccessible. At that time, I was in Sorok and met there with Irina, who was visiting the village for a relative’s wedding. Irina lived in Bokson, the settlement on the other side of the river from Sorok.

She planned to return to Bokson the next day after the wedding took place, but at that time, the level of water rose, and she could not travel by boat. Irina then easily modified her plans and decided to visit her daughter, who lived in Orlik. The same evening we traveled to Orlik together, catching the minibus at the last moment. The next morning it became clear that the road was partly washed out, and Irina could not travel back. Several days later, I met her again, this time in Orlik; as the weather was not improving, she extended her unplanned visit. Every time, when modifying her plans, she did not show impatience and was willing to act according to the changes in nature. During my fieldwork, I came to view this patience as a distinctive feature of Oka residents, and I encountered similar behavior on several other occasions.

When the Mondy-Orlik road was built, it became a part of the landscape and was included in the “synchronization” practices. The locals adjust their movement patterns or plan their activities following the changes happening with the road. This adjustment, or synchronization, is treated in the district as a prerequisite for dwelling in nature. The cases of synchronizing people’s mobility patterns in Oka demonstrate that its transportation routes are deeply rooted in human relations with the landscape. The increased transportation also impacted the formation of new lines—the informal interactions between Oka residents.

The Lines of Informal Connections

The Mondy-Orlik road not only brought new mining companies to the district but also played a role in the development of informal extraction of jade, as well as the formation of new entanglements of transportation and resource extraction. Although the road is not used directly to transfer the jade from Oka to other regions, as this would be too dangerous for the informal miners, its mere existence serves as a symbol of the increased state influence and control in the district. When traveling along the Mondy-Orlik road, all cars must pass through a security checkpoint, because of the district’s proximity to the Mongolian border. The checkpoint and passport control symbolically demonstrate that the right to enter Oka is now granted not by natural forces, as it used to be poetically described in the local legends but by state policies. However, informal miners mostly use forest roads to transport jade to the district’s settlements and then to Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude for sale (AFD B5). By engaging in state-prohibited activities despite police check-ups and road controls, the miners act against the state. The con-

struction of the Mondy-Orlik road meant to strengthen the connection between the state and its citizens; yet its mere existence produces subtle acts of protest.

Informal jade extraction became especially widespread at the beginning of the 2000s when the demand for jade increased in China. China is the primary market for Buriat jade, as there it is considered a sacred stone and, in particular historical periods, was valued higher than gold or silver. In Oka, the boost of informal extraction is related to the establishment of several jade mining companies in the district. Many of the companies are still not working full-scale, thus leaving room for using their sites for informal extraction, picking the jade pieces left from previous extractions, or stealing from the companies' warehouses. This occupation is widespread in the district's settlements among young and middle-aged men. As one of the younger informants told me, referring to the vital role of jade trips for him and his friends, "you may ask us anything about jade—jade is our life!" (AFD B35). The primary jade deposits in the districts are situated around Kitoi and Hara-Nur settlements. The extracted jade is brought to cities and sold to Chinese buyers whose contacts are shared by word of mouth (AFD B8).

The jade trade is "fast money" and, if one is lucky, it is possible to earn enough in a few days to buy a car or make some other financial investment (AFD B25, AFD B8). However, the danger of being caught by the police or the chance to return empty-handed is always a possibility (AFD B5). In general, the informal extraction of jade is a perilous business. "Our boys are walking under bullets for it," an interviewee from Sorok said, referring to an August 2015 episode, when a young unemployed resident of Orlik was accidentally shot by the guards while trying to steal pieces of jade from the warehouse (AFD B16). After this tragedy, the number of illegal miners dropped, but there are still people ready to take the risk, as many of them are unemployed (AFD B27). Because of the dangers of jade business, the trips may be kept secret even from one's immediate family (AFD B8). The whole business is often perceived as a precarious endeavor, which is simultaneously a matter of high secrecy and a source of pride because of its associations with bravery and masculinity.

When explaining their need to keep extracting jade or picking the pieces left by the companies, Oka residents often stress that there is no way for them to become involved in the jade business legally (AFD B5). Thus, they are looking for alternative routes. Many locals, even though admitting that the extraction could be qualified as stealing, still insist that "there is nothing bad in taking something that is anyway your

own" (AFD B4). In this way, they affirm their symbolic right to the resource as a part of belonging to the land. The narrative of symbolic ownership over the natural resources leads to constant tensions when the jade miners are seen by the state as illegal. Many claim that they have full rights to the resources of their land, whereas the mining companies are outsiders without such rights. Local visions of symbolic ownership over jade are deeply connected to the stone's perception as a part of the sentient landscape. The process of jade extraction is viewed as obtaining a natural resource from its spirit masters. Therefore, informal jade trips by Oka residents become embedded in the overall process of "synchronization" with the landscape. In Oka jade has a purely economic value and is not seen as exceptionally beautiful or rare; however, it is embedded in the relations between human and non-human entities.⁷ According to local views, when obtaining jade pieces, one should not act "greedily" and take more than needed. "Greedy" behavior may result in a great misfortune for the informal miner and his family. It is essential to respect the resource and its guarding spirits and to remain attentive to the spirits' intentions to either permit or prohibit the extraction.⁸

Jade trips often involve infrastructural challenges similar to those experienced by Soviet-time geologists. Tatiana Safonova and István Sántha (2016) mention how jade is transported by all-terrain vehicles in the case of Evenki in East Buriatia, where the routes go through the forest with no roads. The locals in Oka use quadricycles or all-terrain cars like UAZ or KamAZ for their jade trips. The forest roads are difficult for driving, and sometimes the cars get stuck in the snow. And sometimes the drivers have to turn around. One of my informants described his "unsuccessful" trip: "From here [Orlik], there is a route to Samarta, and then we descended from the road and went straight to the forest. There, the road was destroyed entirely . . . we did not reach the place; there was too much snow there" (AFD B8).

Elena Liarskaya (2017) demonstrates how the conditions of a remote Yamal settlement with scarce infrastructure influence the formation of strong social networks that function as compensating mechanisms for infrastructural deficits. In the situations of transportation problems in Oka, informal cooperation becomes especially important. The drivers help each other when somebody's car is stuck: "Luckily there were guys on KamAZ following our car, and they helped us to get out" (AFD B5). The illegal miners also cooperate in case of police on the road: "Many guys had satellite phones, and they said several times: the police raid is coming, OMON will get here and will take us" (AFD B5).⁹ Through

cooperation, informal miners reinforce their social ties against the punitive force of the state.

Cooperation means a lot in Oka. During my fieldwork, I noticed that many locals were in frequent contact with relatives and friends from different settlements via mobile phones. It seemed that news traveled between villages with the speed of lightning. Should a disaster occur, the residents now have resources allowing them to mobilize quickly. The group Okinskii anonym, created in 2015 as part of the social network Vkontakte is especially popular. It is used for a variety of discussions, including political or historical debates, but also for common questions such as timetables, weather forecasts, or administrative updates. In the case of floods, the residents of different settlements exchange information on road conditions and the level of water in the river. In case a part of the Mondy-Orlik road is washed out, the news can spread quickly across all the affected settlements. Posts related to road conditions are frequent in Okinskii anonym, as the residents of different settlements communicate to monitor the situation.

Another example of informal cooperation is related to road repairs. The state of roads that connect the district's settlements is a common source of complaints in the region. The residents expect the local administration to address the issue, but when they feel that the administration is not acting in an efficient manner, they mobilize informally. The quality of the road is crucial in the region where even a day or two of rain may result in floods. This is where informal residents' networks become especially important. For example, in April 2017, a group of locals from Huzhir settlement gathered and repaired fifteen kilometers of the road that connects Huzhir to the nearby settlement Saiany. As they explained in an interview for the local newspaper, they were tired of waiting for actions from the district's administration, so they decided to take matters into their own hands. This example illustrates complex local attitudes toward the state, which is often not viewed as a solid security provider. In such cases, informal cooperation and strong interpersonal links serve as a compensation mechanism that mitigates administration failures.

Because of Oka's remote position and transportation challenges, the state is often viewed there as a dangerous force one needs to avoid. For example, the informal extraction of jade seems possible to locals only because, as one of the interviewees framed it, "Putin has no interest in our jade yet" (AFD). At the same time, the acts of informal cooperation, such as police presence alerts or self-organized road reparation could be seen as examples of expressing distrust towards the state and

questioning its power. The acts of informal cooperation and mobilization demonstrate that the state is simultaneously present and absent in the district, and although its power is recognized, it may still be questioned. By engaging in informal jade extraction, locals simultaneously challenge the existing modes of ownership over natural resources and express their symbolic right to extract the local stone.

As Ingold (2007b) argues, direct engagement with materials provides us with a deep understanding of their properties and qualities. Anderson (1998) discusses the notions of property and entitlement among Evenki in Siberia based on their knowledge of the landscape and a high level of interaction with it. Similarly, the knowledge of local resources and close interaction with jade provides the residents of Oka with a sense of symbolic entitlement over the resource. It governs the process of informal jade extraction. As new transportation routes appear and the lines between state and its citizens strengthen, the residents of Oka do not become passive recipients of state policies. Instead, they continue to rely on informal cooperation and inside connections by engaging in subtle, hidden protests against the omnipotence of state power.

Conclusion

If following Ingold, we imagine every living being comprised of connections and entanglements with other beings and with the landscape as a “bundle of lines,” the history of road construction in Oka could be framed as “the life of lines” (Ingold 2015: 3; see also Ingold 2007a: 120). In this sense, interactions between people and objects are interactions of the lines they are comprised of, as movements in the landscape are forms or threading our biographies with the land (Ingold 2007a). In this article, the relations between humans and spirits of place, miners and resources, or residents of different Oka settlements are viewed as flows and fluxes among “bundles of lines.” These relations get reinforced or undergo substantial changes as new lines appear in the landscape modifying it. This article discusses how local dwelling practices and human-resource relations in Oka are influenced by the Mondy-Orlik road and other transportation routes in the area, and how roads in return are impacted by the landscape.

While being associated with modernity and development, roads are, at the same time, “the most archetypal human-made networks” (Dalakoglou 2017: 5). This article builds on complex meanings of roads

that simultaneously serve the centralized state and enable everyday interactions at the most local level. Following Ingold's distinction between planned networks and nonregulated meshworks, the article analyzes the construction of the road as a project of the state, but also as a part of the landscape's lines. The construction of the Mondy-Orlik road was planned and executed by the state as a network project, and one of the reasons for its construction was the need for direct regulated access to gold and jade. Today, the checkpoint in Mondy serves as a symbolic representation of the regulative power of the state, which may grant or refuse access to Oka. I argue that despite being the state-initiated project, the Mondy-Orlik road did not disrupt the existing links and connections between humans and nonhuman actors, but instead became embedded in the processes of human-landscape synchronization. This embeddedness may be illustrated by the sacred sites situated next to the road or by modes of adaptations to transportation vulnerabilities.

The construction of the Mondy-Orlik road became a dividing point in local history, symbolizing more reliable connections to federal centers, improved transportation networks, and a more visible presence of the state. Even though this was a long-awaited project referred to as "The Road of Life," the construction also generated worries about possible threats to the established lifestyle. The locals were especially worried about the activities of the mining companies at the time of the road construction, and these worries are still present in the interview narratives. Although the road connected the district with the rest of Buriatiia, the worries about the increased vulnerability of Oka reinforced the sense of belonging to the land. Many narratives stress the juxtaposition between Oka and the rest of the world, thus bolstering local views of the district as a unique community with strong social ties.

Although the Mondy-Orlik road was designed as a state project, its functioning is governed by the level of water in the river. During the trip between Mondy and Orlik, travelers need to attune their mobility patterns with intentionalities of nonhuman sentient others. In the areas with unpaved roads and more reduced transport connections, the adjustment to natural forces becomes even more visible, as the example of bringing sacrifices to the spirits seeking protection from rockfall near Huzhir demonstrates. Historically, the residents of Oka became accustomed to adapting their movements to natural flows and cycles, and the Mondy-Orlik road became a part of this entanglement.

While becoming embedded in the previously existing entanglements, the road also influenced the establishment of new cooperation

lines such as informal jade mining groups or online discussions of local transportation. By bringing new mining companies to the district, the improved infrastructure simultaneously produced informal interactions formed by the people who could not be officially involved in state-approved extraction projects. Therefore, informal jade extraction could be viewed as a counteraction toward the increased influence of the state and as an example of exercising people's agency. By contradicting the established practices, the Oka residents question the state authority and establish their right to extract the stone based on the sense of place and the feeling of belonging. Similarly, through online communication and informal mobilization, such as Okinskii anonym, the locals govern their rhythms and patterns of movement without relying on the state's guidance and control.

The road's nearly thirty-year-old biography (see Argounova-Low and Prisyazhnyi 2015) is now an integral part of human and nonhuman life stories in Oka. The process of road construction intertwines with the lines of geological investigations and mining development in the district. The Soviet-time geological explorations in Oka were often seen as risky endeavors because of poor transport connections and the absence of roads. The geologists were viewed as "pathfinders" who enter the magical but dangerous land of Oka to transform it and to tame its wild nature. Similarly, Jean-Pierre Alibert, who is praised in Oka for his wondrous graphite mine, started by improving transportation routes in the area. The construction of the Mondy-Orlik road made the transportation of mineral resources as well as their exploration more accessible. However, informal miners still work in the situation of roadlessness when following safer routes of jade transfer and avoiding state control at Mondy checkpoint. Therefore, competing narratives on the presence or absence of the road are equally widespread in Oka. The presence of the road is related to state and industry narratives, and the absence of roads is tethered to informal actions or cooperation.

All these examples of entanglements demonstrate the variety of the meanings of the Mondy-Orlik road and other transportation routes in the life of human and nonhuman actors in Oka. Increased state influence produces counternarratives and counteractions, questioning the existing power dispositions. While obtaining access from the state at Mondy checkpoint, Oka travelers also ask for approval of nonhuman entities. By informing each other about possible police controls on forest roads, informal miners boost their sense of community against state power. Through repairing the road in Huzhir or posting updates about the Mondy-Orlik road condition, the locals get united in situations

when the state is incapable of serving as a security provider. Because of these mixed perceptions of Oka roads, they do not strictly belong to the “top-down” and “bottom-up” (or “transport” vs. “wayfaring”) modalities of interacting with the landscape but exist as a combination of both. The Mondy-Orlik road can be viewed as an example of such a combination, as it is maintained by the state and extractive businesses, but entangled with the flow of the river, human movements, and nonhuman intentionalities. While changing mobility patterns and human-landscape relations, the Mondy-Orlik road was shaped and brought into being through the sacred landscape of Oka.

Acknowledgments

This article was written with the support of the Field and Archival Research Grant (Central European University Foundation of Budapest). A draft version of this article was presented in October 2018 in Berlin at the workshop “Siberia: Infrastructure and Environment,” organized by the Siberian Studies Initiative, Indiana University Bloomington. I thank workshop organizers and participants for their comments and questions, which helped me to improve the article. I am also thankful to the three anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and critical remarks.

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Notes

1. During fieldwork, I conducted thirty-six interviews with local residents, representatives of local administration, activists, and NGO representatives. This article is mostly based on those interviews. The interview conducted with the former manager of Buriatiia's unit on road planning, building, and reparation (Buriatavtodor) and the principal constructor of Mondy-Orlik road was especially valuable for this research. When speaking about the meanings of the road as well as illegal jade extraction in Oka, I also rely on the interviews with the district's several long-term residents. I use pseudonyms for those to whom I refer to by their first name. The interview indicators are comprised of B (for Buriatiia) and the order number of the interview.

2. In addition to interviews, the article is based on the publications in the regional newspaper *Inform Polis* as well as the local newspaper of Okinskii district *Akha* (until 1991, *Saianskaia nov'*). *Akha* is a Buriat name for Okinskii district. The newspaper has been published in Orlik since 1944. In this article, I mostly rely on newspaper materials as a source of information about the process of road construction. However, as *Akha* published opinion pieces and interviews with local residents and activists, I also refer to newspaper materials as reflections of local perceptions of transportation and mobility issues. I also relied on the analysis of publications and communication in Okinskii anonym.

3. The song of Kola Bel'dy, a Soviet singer of indigenous origin, written in 1977.

4. As one of this article's reviewers pointed out, it might be difficult to make 200 kilometers in a day with reindeer. According to the sources I was able to locate, a "good" reindeer is able to travel for approximately 100–160 kilometers per day. Kola Bel'dy's "200 kilometers" could be read as a hyperbole indicating the eagerness of the protagonist to reach his fiancée in a different settlement as soon as possible.

5. The expression "the roaring nineties" (Russ.: *likhie devianostye*) used by the interviewee is a common clichéd reference to the turbulent period of post-Soviet economic and social changes in Russia.

6. Interview with Bair Baldanov, *Selo Rodnoe*, January 13, 2016, <http://selorodnoe.ru/projects/show/id3694542/>.

7. In Oka, jade is sometimes used in the sauna (Russ.: *banya*) as it is believed to have "pure steam."

8. In this sense, jade extraction trips in Oka are viewed similarly to hunting and follow a set of similar rituals. Both hunting and informal jade mining are embedded in sentient perceptions of Oka landscape and strongly associated with luck and risk. Small jade pieces are often kept at home and demonstrated as signs of bravery similarly to hunting trophies (see also Varfolomeeva 2019).

9. OMON—Otriad Mobil'nyi Osobogo Naznacheniiia (Special Purpose Mobile Unit)—is a system of federal police units within Russia's National Guard.

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Field Sources (Author's Field Data)

AFD B4: male, 55 years old, Orlik
AFD B5: male, 30 years old, Orlik
AFD B6: female, 27 years old, Orlik
AFD B8: male, 32 years old, Orlik
AFD B10: male, 56 years old, Orlik
AFD B14: female, 60 years old, Sorok
AFD B15: male, 58 years old, Sorok
AFD B16: female, 61 years old, Sorok
AFD B22: male, 35 years old, Orlik
AFD B23: female, 37 years old, Huzhir
AFD B24: male, 75 years old, Ulan-Ude
AFD B25: male, 62 years old, Ulan-Ude
AFD B27: female, 35 years old, Sorok
AFD B35: male, 20 years old, Orlik